

Standing alone: sustainability challenges for rural and civil society organizations

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Context, Approaches & Results

Donor-driven development projects and programs often have a fairly short lifespan – a lifespan that is of insufficient duration to lay the foundations for sustainable organizations. Nevertheless, these initiatives often do facilitate the creation or establishment of new organizations, yet the result is often disappointing as the organizations disappear shortly after the project or program closes. The challenge is frequently compounded by the fact that these organizations are sometimes created in the middle of a program, leaving only 2 or 3 years to render them sustainable. Experience has shown, however, that a significant lapse of time is needed to render organizations sustainable and allow members to internalize the organization's philosophy and actions – 2 or 3 years is insufficient¹. A final hurdle is constituted by the fact that rural beneficiaries often hesitate with regard to joining these organizations: many cannot or do not want to engage without a guarantee of advantages. In short, poverty severely limits their ability or capacity to take risks.

The model or approach employed by projects in general and ERI in particular is the following. Efforts commence with awareness-raising and education aimed at potential members; an accent is usually placed on explaining the benefits that one may gain via membership. If genuine interest emerges and an organization (usually an association, initially) is established, a prolonged phase of partnership, focused on technical and socio-organizational support, follows. In order to give a clear purpose to the organization, a work plan is produced and subsequent actions focus on its realization; a participatory evaluation of the work plan is conducted at the end of the cycle. It should be noted that understanding and comprehension on the part of rural beneficiaries requires ample time. This is especially true in remote areas where no previous, organized attempt to improve living standards has ever been implemented: many villagers wonder what they will gain if they become members.

The results or experience of ERI Toamasina have revolved around three organizations or structures: the Koloharena (KH) movement composed of numerous associations and cooperatives, the PlaCAZ – a coordination platform for development and conservation actions in and around the Ankeniheny-Zahamena forest corridor, and, more recently, COBA or VOI federations. Of the three, the KH movement has the most developed foundation in place and is at an advanced stage with regard to attaining autonomy and sustainability. Although the strength of the structure is highly variable from zone to zone, many functional and dynamic associations and cooperatives exist. It should be noted, however, that many of the KH components have received nearly 10 years of support, first from the LDI Program, then from ERI. The PlaCAZ's foundation seems to be well established, but many challenges remain. More effort needs to be devoted to obtaining member adherence via a demonstration of the benefits gained from participating in the

¹ This is arguably one of the main lessons from the experience with the Koloharena movement.

platform. Actions aimed at facilitating the platform's independence are also needed, yet support from additional technical partners is currently stymied by the perception that the PlaCAZ is a USAID organization. The COBA Federations are very recent; they were put in place with the understanding that they would receive support from the next cycle of USAID projects. Many of the association members are dynamic and active, but desire more recognition, especially from local authorities. Some have become discouraged after discovering their impotence when faced with illegal logging and the strength and connections of the perpetrators.

Analysis

Many reasons can be cited with regard to the difficulties of realizing sustainable rural or civil society organizations. First of all, leadership problems abound: many members are wary of taking responsibility and power becomes accumulated at the level of a single person; moreover, leaders often act alone without consulting organization members. Communication between leaders and the membership base is often poor. To make matters worse, leadership often changes quickly and without a transfer of skills and information, causing the organization to return to its original point of departure. Another set of challenges revolve around management of funds. These are often not managed in a transparent fashion by organizational leaders, causing a rift between the executive branch and the membership base (who question the use of the funds).

Opportunism is also a major problem: many join a given association in the hopes of gaining easy money or materials, without a true engagement in the organization's medium- and long-term goals and activities. Critical mass is often hard to attain as many disdain the associative model, preferring to work alone. Low literacy or education levels necessitate prolonged periods of awareness raising and planning and slow the establishment of the organization's foundation.

Additional challenges include the fact that many projects chase quantitative results (e.g., number of associations created) at the expense of sustainability considerations. In some cases, the project or program staff are uncommitted or lack a clear vision with regard to long-term goals and ultimate results. Finally, establishing sound organizations in zones that have been "spoiled" by previous, unsustainable development projects is extremely difficult or even impossible. The rural population in these areas is often unwilling to work towards self- or auto-development goals without receiving free materials or per diem (cash).

Based on the LDI and ERI experience, creating or facilitating the establishment of sustainable, rural or civil society organizations requires 5 years at minimum; usually it takes longer. Ideally, the organizations should receive support from two project cycles (8 to 10 years). The first half of this period should be devoted to intensive capacity building, skills transfer, training, and general support; the second half should be a period of gradual withdrawal, supporting action by the organization itself (project or program staff should not do the work that the organization itself should be doing).

Happily, we can suggest several keys to success or enabling conditions. Perhaps the most important are economic concerns: an early and sustained focus on revenue generation² and/or fundraising is critical. Without the means to defray operational costs, including small stipends for key personnel, most rural or civil society organizations will quickly grind to a halt. Similarly,

² This also appears to be a major lesson from the KH movement experience.

early and continual attention to sustainability itself is essential. As soon as the structure or organization is in place, plans need to be made regarding how it will become sustainable, autonomous, and independent. Ensuring that there is engagement on the idea of creating a structure or organization from the members (bottom up) is extremely important. At minimum, the goals of the structure or organization must correspond to the desires and aspiration of its members. Adherence to the principles of auto- or self-development should also not be overlooked. One way to verify engagement is to require a given organization to conduct a few activities with its own means initially, before the collaborating program or project offers financial support.

Many fundamental success elements are the opposite of the leadership challenges described above. Strong leadership that includes fluid communication with the membership base is vital. Likewise, services rendered by the leaders or executive branch to organization members are decisive. Strong lobbying, marketing, profile-raising and communication skills at the executive level are all needed to ensure an organization's sustainability. These are needed in order to expand an organization's base of partners, which is, in turn, a key element for ensuring a lasting structure. At the risk of stating the obvious, cohesion among organization members is also indispensable for its durability. If, for example, an organization's members frequently disagree about activities, management and the overall vision (e.g., goals and objectives), it is unlikely that the structure will endure after program or project support withdraws.

With regards, to fund management, a best practice consists of posting the organization's bank account statement information publicly for all to see – on the outside wall of the organization's office. Ideally, this information should be posted regularly – bi-weekly or monthly. Another way to strengthen rural and civil society organizations is to set up performance-based contracts as opposed to giving them grants³. Contracts that include deliverables require that the beneficiary organizations become more professional and better organized and give them crucial management experience – experience that future technical and financial partners will look for before entering into a formal relationship.

Finally, some aspects of achieving organizational sustainability are directly related to the supporting program or project. Staff must comprehend the global philosophy and ultimate goals of the program from the start. This will ensure that everyone has a clear vision with regard to the direction of the program and the need to leave behind lasting structures or legacies. In order to attain this common comprehension or vision, an in-depth, week-long workshop is recommended at the beginning of a given program. Once implementation begins, continual, on-the-job training and support for new organizations is recommended – instead of a few, short and discrete training sessions.

³ [This is another lesson from the ERI experience with the KH movement.](#)

Conclusion

Laying the foundations for sustainable rural or civil society organizations is fraught with challenges and often gets overlooked during the day-to-day bustle of development programs and projects. An initial and persistent consideration of economic aspects and a clear and early sustainability plan are perhaps the central factors needed to achieve this goal. The limited duration of most development projects or programs hinders this process, however. There is therefore a need to re-think this model or to find a way to ensure continuity and support over two project cycles.